

Soldiers *Online*

Exploring Germany's



The Ammerland region is dotted with windmills, many of which open their doors to the public once a year.

Ammerland

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AMMERLAND. It's some 730 square-kilometers of northwest Germany, where many small villages proudly display the sign: Erholungsgebiet — loosely translated, "health-restoring area."

It's the portion of Germany from Apen in the west to Rastede in the east, and from Edeweicht in the south to Westerstede in the north. The closest large city is Oldenburg.

Ammerland is home to Germany's famed Fehnroute — 101 miles of automobile and bike paths that wind from one picturesque village to another. The route begins about one mile from Autobahn A28, in the direction of Apen, and stretches past miles of lush green and gold pastures where cattle graze, windmills turn and quaint bridges ford snaking canals.

Pioneers painstakingly dug the canals in 1633 from surrounding moors, and the rich peat they extracted became an important export to neighboring countries that used the decomposed vegetation for fertilizer and fuel. Gradually, these people transformed the moor into beautiful and productive farmland and an important industrial and cultural center.

All along the Fehnroute, near Germany's North Sea coast and the Dutch border, lie the area's smaller tourist areas and spas.

They include Wiesmoor, the largest flower



Ammerland offers a range of sights and experiences, from the tranquil countryside (main picture) to the high-tech Transrapid train (above).

producer-exporter in northwestern Germany; Barssel, with its small boat-filled harbor and meandering canals; and the cultural centers of Oldenburg and Bad Zwischenahn.

Bad Zwischenahn is a state-recognized health spa, principally known for the marsh mud used in its health-promoting moor baths. The town is also home to "The Pearl of the Ammerland," Zwischenahner Lake, which draws yachtsmen and paddle-boaters alike and is the site of several renowned regattas.

A casino, town-sponsored music concerts and a popular, true-to-life museum village further enhance the community's reputation as a popular tourist destination.

"Anyone who wants to get to know the lifestyle and customs of the region must visit the Ammerland Farmhouse, here," one tourist official said. Other sites include St. Johannes Church, which dates to 1124, and the old St. Marien Catholic Church.

Country bed and breakfasts and a

world-renowned bird park also draw visitors to the area. Open year-round, Volgelpark Walsrode accommodates some 5,000 birds, among them 850 species from every continent in the world.

Across Germany, whole villages celebrate the spargel (asparagus) harvest in spring and summer. In Harkebrugge, a small village accessible by following the signs to Barssel, young women in overalls and headscarves begin their workday at 6 a.m. by spargel stechen (sticking with a pick) long mounds of dark, damp earth to locate the delicate heads of the asparagus. During the short but productive growing season, from early May to late June, they come to the field early to pick and gently ease the tender plant from the earth.

In the little village of Barssel, the whole town gathers at the harbor to celebrate Matjes Tags, herring days, at the start of the "new" herring season in June. The festival features food stalls, a fest tent, and plenty of music and dancing.

Other events include a flea market, canal cruises and a fireworks celebration.

Visitors to this part of Germany quickly discover that there's always something to do. The local daily newspapers list weekend events, from flea markets and auto and doll shows to area-unique events like Deutscher Muhlentag (German Windmill Days).

Recently, several villages celebrated the

opening of their historic windmills, which have undergone years of renovation.

One of the area's best-known windmills is the Hengstforder Muhle, built in Apen in 1742. Completely restored, it connects to a private house and gasthaus (hotel and

restaurant).

If the painstakingly restored, working windmills don't excite you, Germany's levitating Magnetschnellbahn (magnetic rapid-transit train) just might.

Alfred Schroder is a tour guide for the Deutsche Bundesbahn (German railroad), in Lathen, site of the largest test facility for Germany's rapid transit system, which opened in 1984.

Visitors get a hearty welcome to TR 08, or "Transport 08," an unconventional train, wide as a Boeing 737 aircraft, that uses less energy than conventional trains and travels faster, holding the world record for speed at 450 kilometers per hour. "And it does so more inexpensively, more comfortably and more quietly," Schroder said.

Using powerful magnets and a linear motor over a wandering field, the train is lighter than traditional trains because it needs no rails, no axles and no transmission. And its driver is a computer inside a test-facility building.

Visitors can experience the rapid transit in Lathen for themselves. For 40 Marks (about \$19) visitors can take a 20-minute ride around the 31.5-kilometer test loop.

For more information about the region, contact: Ammerland Tourist Information, Ammerlandallee 12, 26655 Westerstede, Germany, or e-mail them at atis@ammerland.de. □



Spargel stechen (asparagus "sticking") requires a steady hand. The payoff is a bountiful harvest of the delicious white asparagus.



Among Ammerland's more exotic residents are these parrots, just two of the more than 5,000 birds on display at the Volgelpark Walsrode.